

**TRANSCENDING POLITICS: THE SCA BARD IN THE SOCIAL CRISIS**  
by Master Michael Alewright

**A QUESTIONABLE CROWN.**

I once had the displeasure of watching the final round of a crown tournament in which the ultimate winner seemed distinguished more by his unflagging desire to win at any cost and by the apparent thickness of his hide, than by his honor and his fighting prowess. This was many years ago, and out of respect for the passage of time and in hope that he has since taken a better path, I will not name him here. Call him “Joe Sixpack.”

I was the Kingdom bardic champion at the time, and had been charged to create a piece in praise of the new Prince. I fulfilled my duty and performed the piece with apparent enthusiasm, but at that moment it tasted no better than ashes.

Before Prince Joe assumed his shadowed crown I yielded my championship to my successor, but I remained troubled over the matter. It became increasingly clear to me over time that many others were likewise troubled, but that few or none felt empowered to speak. No one discussed the “rhino in the corner” save in low-voiced grumbles uttered in sympathetic company, or as passing snide references. I felt the need to speak out like a growing pressure within me, but was at a loss for how to approach the matter constructively.

Welcome to the Bard’s Dilemma.

**A BARD’S DUTY.**

I believed then, as I do now, that part of the duty of the SCA bard is to empower others by speaking out when all other voices have been silenced by fear, reluctance, politics or an inability to articulate. When it becomes necessary, someone must be willing to stand and say that the emperor has no clothing. Someone must speak the words that all are afraid to say. Someone must lance the boil so that the patient may heal, and must be able to do so with finesse and precision.

While most people in our Society refer to any solo vocal performing art as a “bardic” art, to my mind what separates the working bard from the minstrel is his ability and willingness to carry and perpetuate the conscience and memory of our culture without becoming preachy. The bard is not merely an entertainer; he is also a “social engineer,” rediscovering and refining the power of words, enhancing atmosphere, teaching by example, praising what is praiseworthy, condemning what is not, serving as a safety valve on the culture, and hiding his message in a shell of entertainment much as the fabled Trojan Horse concealed the Greek soldiers. Where a shout might be ignored or resented, the skilled bard may whisper while his audience strains to hear him. He can offer necessary emotional release in difficult times or make his audience see things in a new and more constructive way, always with intent to ennoble both himself and those who hear his words. He can offer stories by which we may better define ourselves, and refine our actions.

The author Orson Scott Card, in the preface to his short-story anthology *Monkey Sonatas*, wrote, “Our very identity is a collection of the stories we have come to believe about ourselves. We are bombarded with the stories of others about us; even our memories of our own lives are filtered through the stories we have constructed to interpret those past events. We revise our identity by revising our self-story. Traditional psychotherapies rely heavily on this process: You

*thought* you were trying to do *X*, but in fact your unconscious purpose was *Y*. Ah, now I understand myself! But I think not – I think that in the moment of believing the new story you simply *revised* your identity. I am no longer a person who tries to do *X*. I am a person who was being driven to do *Y*, without even realizing it. You remain the same person, who performed the same acts. Only the story has been changed.” At risk of being stoned, I submit that bards revise our *X*-pectations of ourselves and others by telling us *Y* we do what it is that we should be doing.

The ultimate message of the bard: *You are watched. What you do and say will be remembered. Become great through your deeds, and we will make you immortal. Abuse your strength and influence, and we will take them from you.*

The ultimate warning to the bard: *You are watched. What you do and say will be remembered. You are strong only through those who offer you their ears, and who trust you with their hearts. You may become great only in your humility. Your power can vanish in an instant.*

### **A CHAT WITH KING SARNAC.**

While I was still struggling over what to do about King Joe, I had the good fortune at a post-revel to find myself in a conversation with King Sarnac of Ealdormere, of revered memory. I sought his counsel on what was troubling me, and he gave me my first introduction to the power that the bard may wield: “In Ealdormere, bards open their mouths and Kings tremble.” To illustrate, he referred to the official Royal lineage of Ealdormere, which boasts of its Royalty but for one King “of whom the Bards are silent.” When I asked His Majesty where one ought to draw the line between the need to speak out, and the need to be (for lack of a less odious term) “politically correct,” he responded very simply: “A bard is above politics.” For me in that moment, it was as if the scales fell from my eyes. I felt free to write.

### **WHAT I WROTE.**

#### *Advice to a King*

*You are the King of the land, Joe,  
You are the King of the land.  
You gained your own Court, all  
Your foes proved but mortal,  
For Death was but yours to command, Joe.  
You are the King of the land.*

*All will recall what they saw, Joe,  
All will recall what they saw.  
The King’s declaration  
Revealed your station  
And all those who watched were in awe, Joe.  
All will recall what they saw.*

*When you command us we go, Joe,  
When you command us we go;*

*For yours is the throne,  
Let your will become known.  
Wish it and see it is so, Joe;  
When you command us we go.*

*History's vision is clear, Joe,  
History's vision is clear;  
And honors will rest  
Upon all of the best,  
So what would it please you to hear, Joe?  
History's vision is clear.*

*All of our eyes are on you, Joe,  
All of our eyes are on you.  
Be you light or dark  
So will go Æthelmearc  
Long after your reign will be through, Joe.  
All of our eyes are on you.*

Having written the piece, but still more than a little fearful, I “play-tested” it to a gathering of three friends, two of whom are themselves writers. When I was done, one friend said in a low tone, “Ooh!” The second asked the first, “What’s wrong with *that*?” The third spoke up to say, “I’m not up on all the politics of the situation, but that song could be taken more than one way.” Bingo! A second play-test before a gathering of bards early in King Joe’s reign showed me that the piece did what I hoped it would do.

One more step remained. Since the song identified the King by name, I did not consider myself “licensed” to perform it until I had sent a copy to King Joe himself, giving him a chance to respond and discuss the matter. He chose not to do so, presumably for reasons that seemed good to him.

#### **THE REACTION.**

I was fortunate: the sky didn’t fall upon me, perhaps because by this time King Joe seemed to have few friends remaining. The reaction to the piece was generally positive, although I selected with some care the time and place to perform it, and tried not to become tiresome about it (overplay can dull a message much as overuse dulls a blade). I received variations of some of the sweetest words any bard can hear: “I have been very upset over this. Thank you for saying what I could not.”

Others have been less fortunate, swimming these dangerous waters. No doubt the boy who proclaimed that the Emperor was naked had an appointment with a gibbet the next day. Fortunately for us our Kings have no such power, but know that there will always be those who will accuse *you* of having made the trouble. As long as your creed is the same as a medical doctor – *first, do no harm* – and your actions are carefully considered, you may face your detractors with calm compassion. Resist the temptation to involve your own ego in the work – which can be sorely tempting – and write in such a way that you can answer for your work to the person you wrote about, with your head held high. Be prepared to answer gently some heartfelt

questions, such as “Why are you doing this to me?” and “What gives you the right?” Make sure that the true answer is *never* the hubristic, “Because I’m a *bard*, of course.” License abused is license revoked. Always consider trashing your work unperformed, especially if the person who inspired it recognizes and honors your concerns, or if performing it might be (or have become) inappropriate to the circumstances. The cure can be worse than the disease. Don’t mistake your role as watchman with the combined roles of judge, jury and executioner.

Some of those who hear or read your piece may someday be in a position of authority; let them learn now – as gently and subtly as possible – what they will face, and what damage they might do if they forget themselves and surrender to their baser natures. Let them learn now that there are always those who watch, and let them give thought to how they might like to be remembered. Give some thought to that, yourself, and also on these:

*Humility must be your first principal, and your last.*  
*Deplore the sin, but love the sinner.*  
*There is a line between satire and abuse, and between service and arrogance.*  
*Speaking the truth is not enough; truth unheard is truth unspoken.*  
*No one asked you to become anyone’s paladin. Consider what you take upon yourself.*  
*Create no conflict of interest, real or perceived.*  
*You are not important, although your service might be.*  
*Take the high road, understand the temptations of the lower one, and teach both.*  
*Always question both your motives and your actions.*  
*Always leave your target an honorable “out.” Seek to ennoble even him.*  
*Do not hide behind a pseudonym; show your true face.*  
*You may not be able to stop what you start.*  
*Know when to back off and remain silent.*

... and on these:

*The moment it becomes about you, you’re done.*  
*The moment it becomes personal between you and someone else, you’re done.*  
*The moment it becomes personal mockery or smear, you’re done.*  
*The moment it becomes a crusade, you’re done.*  
*The moment you use truth as a weapon, you’re done.*  
*The moment people start to think that any of the above is true, you’re done.*  
*The moment you inspire another to act shamefully, you’re done.*

## **TRANSCENDING POLITICS**

Thinking about King Sarnac’s advice, and my experience in the King Joe affair and in others over time, it seems to me that it is not so much that bards are above politics, as that we have the power to *transcend* politics. We are the ones who stand outside the political structure, or who use it openly, and for worthy ends. We consider our conduct, so that we need not fear to answer for our actions. We make sure of our facts, so that we need not fear the truth. We choose our words with careful attention to how they will be received, so that we need not fear to speak. We treat with honor those whose actions we condemn, so that we need not fear to face them. We prepare before placing our hand into the fire, so that we need not fear to be burned.

In the SCA, bards are rediscovering what our mundane society seems almost to have forgotten: *words have power*. Gain someone's ear, and you are invited into his mind as a trusted guest. Perception creates reality by directing our actions, and we influence perception. Skilled and compassionate hands with access to the social "operating system" can do wondrous good, and unskilled or angry ones can wreak all kinds of trouble. You can drive someone out of the SCA. You can ruin relationships. You can factionalize a group. You can make a reputation, or destroy one, *even by mistake*. You can ruin your own SCA experience. Where matters such as this are concerned, the SCA is not a game; it is a living culture to which people devote substantial time and effort, and for which many come to care deeply. Here, we deal in real lives, real relationships, real reputations... and the potential to create (and become embroiled in) real, and enormous, trouble.

### **CRISIS? WHAT CRISIS?**

You think you see a problem? Not everyone will agree, and you need to consider whether those who see no problem worthy of response might just be correct. Also, those who *do* see a problem might not agree on what to do about it. Reality-check yourself thoroughly, act quickly only if there truly is no time for longer consideration, and consider seriously whether it might be worse to speak instead of staying silent. Make sure that you are up to the task you set for yourself; some knives indeed can heal rather than harm, but even a scalpel becomes an instrument of damage in unskilled hands. Be as sure as you can that your cure is not worse than the disease, remembering that burning at the stake is a guaranteed cure for the Common Cold.

### **APPROACHING THE TASK.**

If write you must, and if write you should, do so with a clear goal, knowing that you are not the one causing the problem, but that you are merely responding to it as constructively as you are able, for the greater good. Do so with a clear idea of what emotions you desire to kindle and direct in your audience, and what ideas will ride along with them. Do so with consideration to how your piece will be heard by people who disagree with your basic premise, including the person whose actions you are deploring. Recognize that it is the *actions* that you are deploring, and not the actor. Whatever you offer, it *must* be entertaining, and while it may sometimes bite, it must never, never be (or be perceived as) mean-spirited or cruel.

There are more approaches to a bad situation than the mere didactic, and more moods to offer than angry accusation. Consider that the axe and the saw both may fell the tree, but the saw does so by approaching the task sideways.

Don't preach to the choir; it inflames the choir, and alienates others who only expect a preacher at a pulpit when they go to church. Instead, consider the power of the "stowaway" message hidden in a tale; not everyone will "get it," *but that's just fine*. Consider allegory. Consider compassion. Consider friendly warning. Consider particularly the power of good-natured laughter to remove wind from even the fullest of self-inflated sails, without offering the butt of your joke real insult, real harm, any weapon at all to use in retaliation, or any legitimate reason to raise a word or a weapon against you.

Let us imagine the example of a King who makes his own young children Barons of the Court, and threatens banishment against any who might speak out against it. Obviously, he takes himself very seriously, and he is poised and ready to take on all comers who might naysay. He

waits for the axe; consider using the saw, instead. Might humor serve your audience better than either reinforcing their anger, or causing more of it? Might wry chuckles release their tension and fear by transforming it into something more positive?

*Make way, make way for the Baron, the pearl of a Royal eye.  
He's great in stature, great in wisdom... almost three feet high!  
What loving father would not seek to raise his sprouted seed,  
And show us all, the rosy place where good intentions lead?*

Anyone can hit a nail. The bard's goal, where possible, is to make the nail drive itself, and maybe even to enjoy the process. The task demands the right tool: when you put the hammer down, make sure that you are not screwing up, instead.

### **BAD ACTS AND THE GOOD PEOPLE WHO COMMIT THEM.**

Set aside the political situation, and your bad-acting target is a human being. He is emotionally invested in his actions. He tends to justify his actions to himself, as do we all; the worse they are, the harder it is for him to face the truth of what he has done, and the more heavily he will be compelled to defend them to maintain his good opinion of himself. He may genuinely see (and respond to) outright criticism as a personal attack, and his pain upon receiving it likewise will be genuine. He tells himself stories about why what he does is not only right, but also righteous, and he believes those stories.

Consider whether what you see is nothing more fiendish than that someone else sees a situation differently than you do, has drawn different conclusions based upon the same evidence, or knows more than you do about what is going on; particularly with Royals, there can be so much behind the scenes that his actions would make perfect sense, if only you could see what he is responding to. He might even be right. Consider this prospect carefully, understanding that good and reasonable people may perceive matters very differently without either one being wrong.

Either way, your "malefactor" is as much your audience as any other, and more than some. He deserves your respect, even as you speak out against his actions. Consider offering him not opposition, but instead new stories that will allow him to think about things in a different way and still save face. Remember that someday you will have to look him in the eye, and will have to answer for your words without defensiveness or anger. Remember that you will find yourself in the company of his friends, who may themselves be innocent but who are involved in the matter because of their love for their friend.

Making things more complicated, there will be those who will forgive your malefactor anything, and who will see in your work not critique, but personal attack. They are also your audience.

Kings come and go. Reputation remains: yours, and his. Never lose sight of your goal.

### **SAME KING, DIFFERENT APPROACH.**

During the reign of King Joe, I wrote a second song inspired by the same set of circumstances. This one had the particular benefit of "plausible deniability," in that if it just happens to condemn the very actions that I witnessed, it does so in the most general sense and *certainly* doesn't point the finger at anyone! Even more personally satisfying, I had occasion

during that reign to perform the song for two visiting monarchs. Both of them applauded the sentiment wholeheartedly.

*Honor, true honor, withstands any blow,  
Even the one that will lay a man low;  
If flesh is but feeble, of flesh I won't sing,  
But of honor, great honor, the mark of a king.*

*A king serves his people, who serve him in turn.  
His crown is the coin he must labor to earn,  
For wealth, rank and privilege are but empty pride,  
But for the staunch honor that shines from inside.*

*Honor, true honor, is not thrown away,  
Nor traded for fame that will fade in a day;  
For light cannot last when the evening bells ring,  
Yet honor will hold back the dark for a king.*

*A thief may abscond with an elegant crown,  
And shine as resplendent as kings of renown;  
But though he may prance and proclaim as he will,  
A charlatan crowned is a charlatan still.*

*Honor, true honor, is sweeter than breath,  
And one who has lost it has tasted of death.  
Who suffers such loss, who could not feel a thing?  
For honor is ever the life of a king.*

*Pray be as a king in the life that you live,  
And care not for taking, but learn how to give.  
Look to your monarch who sits on the throne,  
And think on the virtues for which he is known.*

*Honor, true honor, is worth any cost,  
And never is bested, though battles be lost.  
Though gold you may lack, shining honor will bring  
You riches as worthy as those of a king.*

#### **CHESS IN THE WHIRLWIND.**

Mundane events sometimes can impact and color the SCA experience. The most obvious, and cataclysmic, example occurred on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, when the world changed and we experienced a different meaning of “living history.”

The following Saturday was to be the coronation of Æthelmearc's new King and Queen, Andrew and Alexandra, at an event site in Jennerstown, Pennsylvania, approximately twenty miles from the crash site of Flight 93. Unresolved emotions were running high, and I set out to

create a piece that, while SCA-compatible, would nevertheless honor the real-world emotions that had entered the game, and that would channel the shared trauma into something to strengthen us rather than to distract and fragment.

*Song of the Free*

*Unwelcome and armed you come  
Your minions invade our land;  
And cold grow our hearts when the killing starts,  
But whatever should come, we stand*

*You see plunder ripe for taking,  
And think to reach out your hand;  
But beware of the prey that you hunt today,  
For tomorrow will come; we stand.*

*We stand, we stand  
Unbowed by your demand.  
You will come to see that we still live free,  
And despite your sword, we stand.*

*Our souls feel the chill of winter  
Through the flames your anger fanned.  
Our houses burned but our lesson learned,  
In the hills and woods we stand.*

*You've killed us by the thousands,  
And wrecked what once was grand.  
Commit your crime, we will bide our time  
When the moment comes, we stand.*

*We stand, we stand,  
And refuse to be unmanned.  
Let the hours creep as you try to sleep,  
For there in the dark, we stand.*

*Let your eyes be filled with terror,  
Ere your mouth be filled with sand.  
Let your flesh be meat for the crows to eat;  
Let revenge begin—we stand.*

*Let crops grow where they've fallen,  
Who moved by your command.  
Let their widows fear when we march from here,  
And outside your door we stand.*

*We stand, we stand*

*For the doom of all you planned.  
When the sight of me is the last you see,  
Let your last thought be: we stand.*

Whether writing to address a single person's antisocial actions, or reacting to wide-ranging cataclysm, the principals are much the same:

*Know and honor your audience  
Consider the "ride" you want to offer them, and what you want to leave them with.  
Try to encompass both problem and solution in your work.  
Try to turn negatives into positives, or at least to seek the best within the worst.  
Respect and foster the atmosphere we seek to create.  
Separate your ego from your work, and allow the piece to become a shared experience.  
Offer your audience meaningful ideas without bludgeoning them.*

#### **THE RISING FLAMES: ADDRESSING PUBLIC EXPRESSION OF ANGER.**

Try an experiment some time: at a party, put on a mask. A simple domino mask will do, or a cut paper plate and a piece of string; anything that covers the face, particularly the area around your eyes. Leave the mask on for a while, and see if you don't notice within yourself a peculiar feeling of freedom, a certain sense of license-in-isolation that permits you to act in ways that you might not seriously consider if your face remained uncovered, even though you know perfectly well that your identity is just as obvious as it ever was. Being inside a car offers the same sense of license as you interact with other drivers, and being on the Internet can offer even more. Any time there is sense of disconnection between actions and consequences, the temptation is there. Is it any wonder that people who might never consider insulting you to your face find it easy to express destructive anger remotely?

Even in a Society dedicated to honor, courtesy and chivalry – to the principal of self-governance – it is all too easy for such flames to spread. Trying to address it simply by condemnation accomplishes little. Showing the problem and offering a better alternative may accomplish much more. Leadership is always the best example.

Some years ago in Æthelmearc, a newly-minted Laurel and a companion were revealed to have knowingly used their art as a weapon against another, under circumstances that made the act particularly egregious. Some viewed the Crown's subsequent reaction (for the Laurel, banishment from the Royal presence) as too mild, and private anger began to be expressed publicly on the Kingdom's electronic distribution list on the heels of a public apology by the perpetrators that many considered insufficient. A particular Peer responded to one angry post in a way that seemed calculated to fan flames yet higher:

*I was wondering when somebody was going to have enough guts to say what you just said and pose the question: "how tragically ironic and hypocritical is this organization?" Apparently during the days and weeks of silence the answer is "boundless--so as to accommodate the comfort level that all cowards crave."*

Anticipating that this inflammatory post – particularly at a time when Peerlike conduct already was at issue – would generate angry response that would lead nowhere worthwhile, I resolved to draw the fire upon myself with a response that addressed my concern without departing from the principles that make our Society strong. If I could demonstrate by example that civil and cultured conduct was a viable and effective answer to incivility, perhaps I could help defuse part of a bad situation while remaining immune to the anger that inspired it; perhaps I could show how one might place a hand into the fire without becoming burned. I chose Terza Rima, an Italian poetry form suitable for discourse.

*Not everyone who thinks will choose to speak,  
Nor everyone who speaks gives pause for thought;  
If Silence waited only on the weak,  
The noise would make such weakness dearly bought!  
Anathema pollutes our cherish'd hall  
But those who brought it rightfully are caught  
And, clothèd in disgrace before us all,  
Their malice stands exposed as marks of shame.  
May every gentle note it, and recall  
That what we make here is not but a game  
Nor is their deed apologized away.  
We each are watched, and even those whose fame  
Is great may set in fire at end of day.  
Consider, though, that with the damage done  
But she unbowed whose joy some sought to slay,  
And even as we turn our backs to shun  
The ones who fouled the nest where all would roost,  
Their path to penance cannot be begun  
But by regretful words more rightly loosed  
Than were those wicked words that those must chase.  
I can but hope to see reintroduced  
The pious virtues once suppos'd to grace  
The culprits; but if it be so or not,  
'Tis their affair. And though their deeds were base,  
They own them up, as public as their plot  
Was private. Think about them what you will,  
And let them bear their richly purchased lot,  
But do not let their ill breed further ill  
Lest we see but the flaw before our eyes  
And never more the diamonds. We are still  
A worthy folk. When discord would arise,  
In civil tongues our greatest virtue lies.*

The private responses I received were overwhelmingly positive, including from the Crown. People really do care about what we build in this wonderful Society of ours – or they would not have been so angry in the first place – and those who demonstrate its strength in the face of adversity perform a service to all.

As you consider involving yourself in such a matter, it is useful to remember that a spirited public dialogue – even a passionate one – is the social equivalent of an individual thinking about a deep concern, and your role as a bard is not to interrupt such dialogue, but rather is to facilitate it by catching it if it begins to slide down the slippery slope into argument. Right-thinking and -hearted people can disagree, and more often than not, no particular faction may claim legitimate title to being “right.” There will always be those who, thinking in black-and-white terms, will tend to equate rejection of a person’s idea with disdain for the person, and who will respond defensively. For that reason it is best to approach the matter gently, and with respect; as above, consider whether the axe or the saw is the best tool for the job. Perhaps the very best response you can receive from an ideological opponent is, “Thank you. I never thought about it that way, before.” Speak to the nobility that lies sleeping within your opponent, and it might just awaken.

I had need and occasion to respond in similar fashion to another inflammatory post by the same angry Peer, under different circumstances. This Peer posted, without visible provocation and in response to someone’s innocuous comment that a certain message was off-topic for the Kingdom distribution list:

*By all means, let us keep politics and the like off this list so that we may pursue other more important activities in this glorious organization. I would say that the pursuit of awards, self aggrandizement, petty bickering and the vast stupidities that are indulged in on a hourly basis in the SCA are much more important than a simple act of acknowledging one of our fallen heroes in this, the most beautiful country on God's earth.*

I responded publicly with a sonnet, this time using less of the saw, and more of the axe:

*Your base disdain bears little to commend  
Those virtues which your station claims to bear,  
That you would cast them all aside to lend  
Your tongue to use a noble should forswear.  
Are we so small? Is what we grow so cheap,  
You see it as the blossom of an hour,  
And, now the moment's passed, you roar and leap  
In wanton rage to crush that idle flower?  
Perhaps that is your choice: to trade all this,  
And buy instead a jingoistic joy,  
Pretending that your words are not amiss,  
Nor blushing at the anger you employ.  
Whatever honors one purports to claim  
Are earned by deeds, and not by acts of shame.*

The offending Peer responded privately and rather less politely, but since I stepped forward both to damp and draw her fire, I was saddened but not surprised. Again, private populace response was very positive.

Years after I wrote this, a King whom I had not met prior to the commencement of his reign told me that he kept this sonnet of mine to refer to, whenever he became too depressed over

SCA politics and started to wonder why he bothered to remain. That leads me to something else for the bard to keep in mind: *Your words matter. You can never know just when they will touch another's life, but you can make sure that when they do, they will touch it for the better.*

### COMES THE REAPER.

Look at any picture from the early days of the SCA, and apart from the hairstyles and similar incidental anachronisms, what is truly strange about it to modern SCA eyes is that everyone in the photo is probably of college age. Imagine the cultural divide between that early Society and the one we enjoy today, where children and greybeards abound.

One difference looms large. In any population, given enough time, age, illness and accident will take their sorry toll; sadly, we are not immune. Friends fall. Loved ones fall. Pillars of our Society fall. Answering real grief in real time, in context of our game, requires a balancing act to avoid trivializing or over-fictionalizing the tragedy. Avoid making your piece saccharine or trite, and honor the fallen without turning them into sanctified caricatures. Be sensitive without tiptoeing, and consider the experience you wish to offer to those who loved the departed, as well as those who never knew him; both are your audience.

#### *Hail and Farewell (for Earl Sir Bearengaer hinn Rauthi)*

*What paradox we are: immortal flame  
Bound fast to flesh, with all its many ills.  
We scorn our clay, and in our pride proclaim  
Our selves to be our own. We ply our skills,  
And seek out friends to share our gifts and lives  
Whilst patient night collects our endless days,  
Until (at length) a bitter morn arrives  
To offer sad reminder with its rays.  
Helplessly, we watch a friend laid low,  
The burden of his spirit now too great  
For mortal flesh to bear; and well we know  
That all beneath the sky must share his fate.  
So let us rise, and toast that far-off shore  
Where wait the ones we lose, who go before.*

#### *(for Baroness Anna of Kiev, of the Debatable Lands)*

*Let minstrels' merry songs be stilled.  
Let dancers stand aghast.  
Let poets ply their pens to frame  
An Inspiration passed.  
Let those who love the hearthstone weep  
To find it now but cold,  
And tipplers sip their share of grief  
And pray to be consoled.  
Let dawn arrive tomorrow, but*

*This sunset, strike a spark,  
And let its glimmer stand for her  
Whose passing leaves us dark.*

*(for Duke Sir Morguhn Sheridan: knight, duke, patron)  
There is a tale that none should know, nor ever should be spoken,  
That echoes often in unwilling ears;  
That slyly sings of theft of all we love, to leave us broken  
With little left to offer, save for tears.*

*How bitter are the ancient words, refreshed each reddened dawn,  
New-writ in dust, to read in weathered stone,  
Proclaiming unto all that something marvelous is gone;  
And someone weeps, who should not be alone.*

*Lost in blinding newborn depths of grief, with wails we pay  
For every merry song that claimed a voice,  
And seek, in mem'ry's faded treasure, vengefully to slay  
The truth, that we might someday more rejoice.*

*We live, we die: there is the tale. The end comes far too soon;  
One shaken breath tells all there is to hear.  
Come chance, come choice or failing flesh, and fragile clay is hewn  
To join the rest who fall, and disappear.*

*But what of this? If so it be, that each must leave his dwelling,  
To go wherever wait the honored dead,  
That tragic tale has never needed human lips for telling;  
So let us speak of other things, instead.*

*Here stood a man of middle years, his frame yet hale and tall,  
Who lived his days as seemed to please him best,  
Who wore a blade-won crown and held two kingdoms in his thrall,  
And often valued labor, over rest.*

*He had his flaws; erase them not, but leave him as we knew:  
A well-met friend rough-edged, but also kind,  
Who planned and built, who ever served, and earned the love of two  
He would have wept in shame to leave behind.*

*So let us weep as he cannot, and taste the air we breathe,  
And raise a glass to toast an absent friend,  
And offer comfort, scant but true, to those who most must grieve,  
And never judge his story by its end.*

*And let us live! In us, the tale is not yet fully told,  
And life, like scotch, is meant to be imbibed.  
With sword or pen or threaded needle: write with what you hold,  
And meet your end with chapters yet unscribed.*

*And sometimes pause, and think of Morguhn, you who knew his light,  
For life can offer just one guarantee.  
Until that day, we seek the grace to gaze upon the sight  
His eyes (we pray) are blessed enough to see.*

#### **THE LIGHTER SIDE.**

Sometimes, something that has a negative impact is not the product of anger, or malfeasance, or anything more than simple good intentions gone terribly wrong. No one is truly hurt, but many are angry or annoyed and are left asking, “What was he *thinking?*” His Majesty of the East at Pennsic 37 recognized a genuine problem – perennially unbalanced sides in Pennsic war-point battles – and set out to solve it with the very best of intentions by unilaterally conceding all the war points, at the conclusion of opening ceremonies. This particular set of good intentions did not lead quite where he might have hoped, and he left a situation ripe to be addressed by satire. Where I performed my song (below) at War, people angry and annoyed by what they saw as high-handed action offered up smiles and hearty laughter. Can people remain angry over something that makes them laugh?

*Come on, kids, it's a new kind of War.  
Peace has won, and rules evermore.  
"Hugs, not thugs" is the song we sing.  
All give thanks to the Eastern King!*

*Knights and squires, hear the news:  
Tape in pink and baby blues  
Graces helms, while the nerf shafts fly.  
"Kum-ba-YA!" is our battle cry.*

*"Lose to win" is the sacrifice  
The Eastrealm made, so all, play nice!  
Let your blows be sweet and light.  
Dance a bransle and win the fight.*

*Konrad has a new chancellor:  
Hark to the purple dinosaur.  
The benefits will never cease...  
All the excitement of war and peace!*

*You who came in hope to win,  
It can be yours without battle's din.  
Want war points? There's still a way:  
Be the high bidder when they're on eBay!*

## DEAR LORD, WHAT HAVE I DONE?

While I would like to say that Cerian Cantwr is a bad, bad man, in fact he is a good man unable to resist a gleefully impish streak, and who writes catchy songs about subjects that sometimes make a listener's head (or at least his sensibilities) explode. The Polar Cow (that Pernicious Porterhouse of Doom) came first. Miguel the were-llama was not far behind. These were bad enough, but when he wrote a song about Vampire Penguins, enough was very much enough. ~~Vengeance~~ Duty called, and I was compelled to write. I should have known better. Oh mothers, teach your children not to do what I have done:

### *Cerian's Menagerie*

*My friends, I pray you be wary,  
And only go out in daylight.  
There are menaces here that make merry,  
And rejoice in the coming of night.  
And meat is the thing they are craving;  
Not steak – they eat people with glee.  
In fear, anyone would run raving  
From Cerian's menagerie.*

*The world is a place full of terror  
That walks in an innocent skin.  
You won't live to regret your first error;  
We'll notify your next of kin.  
"How sad," they will say, "he was beaten,  
But then, he could never have won.  
It's really a shame he was eaten,  
That can't have been very much fun."*

*From the Pole to the Pole they are waiting,  
And also at all points between.  
The cows and the penguins are sating  
Their hunger from bones they've picked clean;  
And the llamas have left a great stack o'  
Remains of their keepers about.  
Beware the ferocious alpaca;  
By moonlight its fangs will come out.*

*The tales that are told are too bloody  
For tender young children to hear;  
But survivors will tell you to study  
The ways of the things that you fear.  
And one has told many a story  
Of creatures I pray you don't see,  
Or else your short future is gory*

*From Cerian's menagerie.*

*One wonders what next will be creeping  
From out of the darkening trees;  
Perhaps a werefrog will come leaping,  
Or else it's carnivorous cheese.  
They will take you down sooner or later.  
The best you can hope is to flee  
From monsters and from their creator...  
From Cerian's menagerie!*

At last count, there were two carnivorous cheese songs (only one of them by Cerian!) and also a hand puppet. The Menagerie now has grown into a nightmarish jungle of creatures better left undescribed to anyone who clings desperately to the last remaining shreds of his sanity. Cerian's pen has not yet run out of ink. The world as we know it may be doomed, and it is partially my fault. Be afraid.